

CLASS 14

Becoming More Effective Communicators

CLASS OVERVIEW

In this class we will review:

- The need for leaders to have strong communication skills.
- The need for leaders to have strong listening skills.
- The basics of listening carefully.
- The importance of setting a good example in communication.

Opening Group Question:

- Why is effective communication so important to God's people, and especially to those in leadership positions within the Church?

I. Introduction

Human reasoning and the ability to clearly communicate are two of the characteristics that set us apart from animals. God has given all of us the tools to communicate effectively; however, not all of us know how to use these tools well.

Group Question: What are the two types of communication? Which is more effective? Why?

Verbal and non-verbal (body language) communication are the two types of communication available to us as human beings. Obviously non-verbal communication, including hand gestures, body positioning, eye contact and other methods of non-verbal communication are open to interpretation and are more likely to be ineffective when used alone. A primary reason for their potential ineffectiveness is that they can be interpreted differently by different people in different situations—there is no way to clarify what these non-verbal cues mean without using verbal communication. Additionally non-verbal cues often conflict with verbal comments. When non-verbal and verbal communication are used in concert, one reinforces the other and the two can be very powerful.

God gave us ears and a mouth so that we can use them both to communicate effectively—to communicate verbally. Again though, at times, different people will interpret even what is said differently. There are reasons for misunderstanding verbal communication (it does not matter whether it is written or oral) and these will be discussed next.

II. Failing to Communicate Effectively

Do people have difficulty understanding you? How well do you say what you mean? How clearly do you describe what you mean?

Example: We will stereotype here to make a point. Did you realize that men and women typically communicate differently? Men are often direct and to the point. They tend to avoid "small talk" (a term men may have coined) and what they perceive to be non-essential personal conversation when they have a task to accomplish. Women, on the other hand, tend to relish communication in general. They enjoy talking about a whole host of issues and may weave "essential" issues into the greater conversation. For women, the gratification comes from the *process* of communication. For men, the *process* is often a waste of time and they would be much more pleased if the details of the task were hammered out quickly. Conversely, when women are involved in the way men accomplish tasks, the brief conversation may be perceived as

uncaring, trite, and impersonal—lacking in the important personal sharing that builds and ties relationships together.

So what can we all learn from this example? First, different people communicate in different ways. What works for one person will not necessarily work for another person. Effective communicators understand and identify differences in communication styles. If we think and communicate ideas quickly and expect everyone else to function the same way, we will fail to communicate effectively with many people. Conversely, if we like to talk about all kinds of issues prior to addressing the issue at hand, a portion of our audience may lose interest and be indifferent by the time we finally get to our issue at hand.

To communicate effectively, we need to understand our audience, and make a great effort to communicate in a way that they can relate to, understand, and feel comfortable with. If we do not make the effort to do this, we may be wasting not only our own time, but also that of the people we are hoping to talk with and help.

III. How to Improve Verbal Communication Effectiveness (Handout 1)

Source: Greenberg, J. (2002). *Comprehensive Stress Management*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

1. **Plan a Time to Talk**

Have you ever been forced into a conversation that you had neither time for nor were in the mood to have? Timing, as they say, IS everything—and this applies to communication too. Here are some keys to picking the proper time to talk about important issues:

- a. Make sure you have sufficient time to have a useful and meaningful discussion.
- b. Pick a location where you will not be interrupted. Turn off the cell phone too.
- c. Allow the other person to share thoughts and feelings; do not condemn them.
- d. Really describe your thoughts and feelings. The other person cannot read your mind.
- e. Both parties must approach the discussion with the goal of improving the situation.

2. **Begin With Agreement**

Start out your discussion by addressing some of the areas upon which you agree. If you begin with agreement, you will be more comfortable discussing the issue of concern.

3. **Use “And,” not “But”**

The word “but” in the English language acts just like an eraser. It acts to erase everything that came before it. For example: “I really like the way you encouraged her, but...” What you are really saying is that “the way I would suggest is much better than the way you did it.” We really need to think about “how” someone else will interpret even our smallest comments.

4. **Use “I” Statements**

By “I” statements, we mean statements that include reference to yourself. For example: “When you use the word “but” in your comments to me, I feel like nothing I do matters to you.” This type of statement helps the other person or people understand exactly how you feel. When people know how you feel personally, they will be less likely to dismiss what you are saying. Additionally, unless you voice that these are “your” thoughts, opinions and feelings, how is the other person to know? The other person cannot read your mind!

5. **Avoid “Why” Questions**

Beginning statements with the word “Why” will often put the other person on the defensive. It will often be perceived as an accusation rather than a question. Using the question “Why?” is often appropriate, but we need to consider our statements so as to avoid offending other people. If we offend them at the beginning of a discussion, we may never win them over.

6. **Pray About Your Conversations**

We are told that God can put thoughts and ideas into our heads if we allow Him to (Matt 10:19-20). We are also told to “earnestly desire the best” spiritual gifts, and especially that of *prophecy* (1 Cor 12:31; 14:1). The gift of prophecy (1 Cor 12:10; Rom 12:6) is the gift of “inspired speaking” as defined by *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance* (Greek word number 4394 & 4396). So, as we pray for our conversation, we should be praying to God to inspire our speaking, giving us the “spiritual gift” of inspired speaking so that He can use us and work through us in our conversations.

IV. Failing to Listen Effectively

Have you ever been accused of "not listening" to another person? Or have people ever told you that you were not "hearing" what they were saying?

Satan tries to influence everything that we do, including our speech and hearing. Christ observed that "hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Matt 13:13). Although He was talking here about those who are not called by God being unable to understand His teachings, this verse actually can also apply to our communication with others. It IS possible to "hear" what is said and not really "hear" or understand. Often, this happens when someone makes a comment or observation that gets us to think of a response. As we ponder over our response, we disconnect ourselves from the conversation and fail to hear other important things that are being said. By the time we have formulated our response, we may have missed a sizeable portion of the explanation, thus our response may be far from the actual question—demonstrating to the other person that we were not listening.

To be effective communicators, we must develop the skill of listening. Often times we must "listen between the lines," because many people do not communicate effectively and clearly. We must "listen" for what IS NOT being said, as well as for what IS being said.

From the example of Elijah, we are given an example of listening. God chose not to speak in an overt and obvious manner (through strong wind, and earthquake, or fire) but chose to speak to Elijah through a "still small" or "delicate whispering" voice (1 Kings 19:11-18). Because of God's approach, Elijah could not just sit back and only casually listen to all that was intended. Instead, Elijah had to concentrate and listen very carefully. We can learn from this example. We must be patient and willing to listen carefully in order to hear what people are "really saying."

"The ear of the righteous studies how to answer, But the mouth of the wicked pours forth evil."
—Proverbs 15:28

Use Active Listening:

Active listening is a process that can be very helpful and help ensure that you really understand what someone is saying, especially in counseling. It assumes that either we may misunderstand because we may miss an important comment, or we may misunderstand because the "talker" is being unclear.

Active Listening Skills (Handout 2)

1. **Listen Carefully**—"He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him" (Prov 18:13). We must be intent on really listening to the "whole story" when someone else is talking. We must also seek out "both sides" of the story to make a wise decision. If we are busy formulating our response while they are talking, we will likely miss what they are saying. Listening carefully also involves NOT assuming you know "where the person is going," but **listening** to where they are going with their comments. If we assume we already know what a person will say, we may once again miss some important comments they may make.
2. **Provide Feedback to the Talker**—If we understand what is being said, we can nod our head or make small comments like "yes" or "ok." This assures them that we are paying attention and listening to what they are saying.
3. **Comment Back to the Talker**—It is very helpful for both you and the speaker to summarize what was just said. We can help make sure that we heard correctly by "paraphrasing" back to the person what we understood was said, basically summarizing and rephrasing "in our own words" what we heard. We can use comments like, "I think what you said was..." or, "If I heard you correctly, you said..." If we do indeed understand correctly, the person will acknowledge it. If we have misunderstood their meaning, we will quickly be told.
4. **Listen With Your Eyes**—Active listening also involves our eyes. As we begin to talk, give advice, or respond to people, their body language may quickly tell us whether or not they agree

*looking away
etc., many
convey lack
of interest*

with or understand our comments. Watch their eyes, facial expressions, and body. If they are comfortable with and understand our comments, they will look engaged, make eye contact, and their posture will orient their body toward us. If they disagree, do not understand, or feel uncomfortable by what we are saying, they may break eye contact, look confused, furrow their brow, fidget in their seat, etc. We must watch for these signs and if we see them, STOP speaking and ask if there is a problem. The mistake that many make when communicating, is that they are so engrossed in what they are saying that they fail to "listen" (with their eyes and ears) to the feedback that the other person is providing. If we "talk too much" we will be seen as self-centered and be perceived as very poor listeners (James 1:19). If people perceive us as poor listeners, they will be uncomfortable bringing their concerns to us and instead approach someone who will "really hear" what they have to say.

Being a successful listener is a skill that must be practiced—and it requires patience. Few are "born" with this skill. If you are unsure of the degree to which you possess this skill, ask someone who you think IS a good listener. They may be able to give you some advice on how to improve this skill. But, if you ask, be prepared for feedback which may require you to change.

V. Conclusion

Being an effective communicator is a hallmark of an excellent leader. Without good communication skills (both speaking and listening), those who you lead may feel neglected, unimportant, and unheard. They may also misunderstand what you intend and what you teach. As leaders, we are warned about offending or "leading" Christ's sheep astray (Mark 9:42). If we cannot communicate effectively (either in speaking or in listening) we are at much greater risk for doing just that. We all need to work on our communication skills so that God can use us even more effectively to lead His people and finish His work.

Optional Homework for Next Class: (choose one assignment to complete)

- With your spouse or another Church member, talk about what leaders can do in order to "connect" better with or relate better to those whom they are leading.
- Begin to review some of the gospel accounts of Christ's teaching and pay particular attention to HOW Christ engaged His audience and HOW He taught.